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PAPERS FROM "THE SPECTATOR"—THE OPERA



Wednesday, March 21, 1710-11.

—Equiti quoque jam migravit ab aure voluptas
Omnis ad incertos oculos et gaudia vana.
Hor. 2 Ep. i. 187.

But now our nobles too are fops and vain,
Neglect the sense, but love the painted scene
Creech.

It is my design in this paper to deliver down to posterity a faithful account of the Italian opera, and of the gradual progress which it has made upon the English stage; for there is no question but our great-grandchildren will be very curious to know the reason why their forefathers used to sit together like an audience of foreigners in their own country, and to hear whole plays acted before them in a tongue which they did not understand.

"Ar Sinoe" was the first opera that gave us a taste of Italian music. The

great success this opera met with produced some attempts of forming pieces upon Italian plans, which should give a more natural and reasonable entertainment than what can be met with in the elaborate trifles of that nation. This alarmed the poetasters and fiddlers of the town, who were used to deal in a more ordinary kind of ware; and therefore laid down an established rule, which is received as such to this day, "That nothing is capable of being well set to music, that is not nonsense."

The maxim was no sooner received, but we immediately fell to translating the Italian operas; and as there was no great danger of hurting the sense of those extraordinary pieces, our authors would often make words of their own which were entirely foreign to the meaning of the passages they pretended



J. Kneller pinxt.

Goldar Sculp.

JOSEPH ADDISON ESQ^r.

Author of the "Spectator" Papers on the Opera

to translate; their chief care being to make the numbers of the English verse answer to those of the Italian, that both of them might go to the same tune. Thus the famous song in *Camilla*:

Barbara si t'intendo, &c.

'Barbarous woman, yes, I know your meaning.'

which expresses the resentments of an angry lover, was translated into that English lamentation,

'Frail are a lover's hopes,' &c.

And it was pleasant enough to see the most refined persons of the British nation dying away and languishing to notes that were filled with a spirit of rage and indignation. It happened also very frequently, where the sense was rightly translated, the necessary transposition of words, which were drawn out of the phrase of one tongue into that of another, made the music appear very absurd in one tongue that was very natural in the other. I remember an Italian verse that ran thus, word for word:

'And turn'd my rage into pity;'

which the English for rhyme sake translated,

'And into pity turn'd my rage.'

By this means the soft notes that were adapted to pity in the Italian, fell upon the word rage in the English; and the angry sounds that were tuned to rage in the original, were made to express pity in the translation. It oftentimes happened likewise, that the finest notes in the air fell upon the most insignificant words in the sentence. I have known the word 'and' pursued through the whole gamut; have been entertained with many a melodious 'the;' and have heard the most beauti-

ful graces, quavers, and divisions bestowed upon 'then,' 'for,' and 'from;' to the eternal honour of our English particles.

The next step to our refinement was the introducing of Italian actors into our opera; who sung their parts in their own language, at the same time that our countrymen performed theirs in our native tongue. The king or hero of the play generally spoke in Italian, and his slaves answered him in English. The lover frequently made his court, and gained the heart of his princess, in a language which she did not understand. One would have thought it very difficult to have carried on dialogues after this manner without an interpreter between the persons that conversed together; but this was the state of the English stage for about three years.

At length the audience grew tired of understanding half the opera; and therefore, to ease themselves entirely of the fatigue of thinking, have so ordered it at present, that the whole opera is performed in an unknown tongue. We no longer understand the language of our own stage; insomuch that I have often been afraid, when I have seen our Italian performers chattering in the vehemence of action, that they have been calling us names, and abusing us among themselves; but I hope, since we do put such an entire confidence in them, they will not talk against us before our faces, though they may do it with the same safety as if it were behind our backs. In the meantime, I cannot forbear thinking how naturally an historian who writes two or three hundred years hence, and does not know the taste of his wise

forefathers, will make the following reflection: 'In the beginning of the XVIII century, the Italian tongue was so well understood in England, that operas were acted on the public stage in that language.'

One scarce knows how to be serious in the confutation of an absurdity that shows itself at the first sight. It does not want any great measure of sense to see the ridicule of this monstrous practice; but what makes it the more astonishing, it is not the taste of the rabble, but of persons of the greatest politeness, which has established it.

If the Italians have a genius for music above the English, the English have a genius for other performances of a much higher nature, and capable of giving the mind a much nobler entertainment. Would one think it was possible (at a time when an author lived that was able to write the "Phaedra" and "Hippolitus") for a people to be so stupidly fond of the Italian opera, as scarce to give a third day's hearing to that admirable tragedy? Music is certainly a very agreeable entertainment; but if it would take the entire possession of our ears; if it would make us incapable of hearing sense; if it would exclude arts that have a much greater tendency to the refinement of human nature; I must confess I would allow it no better quarter than Plato has done, who banishes it out of his commonwealth.

At present our notions of music are so very uncertain, that we do not know what it is we like; only, in general, we are transported with anything that is not English; so it be of a foreign growth, let it be Italian, French, or High Dutch, it is the same thing. In short, our Eng-

lish music is quite rooted out, and nothing yet planted in its stead.

When a royal palace is burnt to the ground, every man is at liberty to present his plan for a new one; and, though it be but indifferently put together, it may furnish several hints that may be of use to a good architect. I shall take the same liberty in a following paper, of giving my opinion upon the subject of music; which I shall lay down only in a problematical manner, to be considered by those who are masters in the art.

Tuesday, April 3, 1711.

—Sermo lingua concinnus utraque

Suavior: ut Chio nota si commista Falerni est.

Hor. 1 Sat. x. 23.

Both tongues united sweeter sounds produce,
Like Chian mix'd with Falernian juice.

There is nothing that has more startled our English audience, than the Italian recitativo at its first entrance upon the stage. People were wonderfully surprised to hear generals singing the word of command, and ladies delivering messages in music. Our countrymen could not forbear laughing when they heard a lover chanting out a billet-doux, and even the superscription of a letter set to a tune. The famous blunder in an old play of "Enter a king and two fiddlers solus," was now no longer an absurdity, when it was impossible for a hero in the desert, or a princess in her closet, to speak anything unaccompanied with musical instruments.

But however this Italian method of acting in recitativo might appear at first hearing, I cannot but think it much more just than that which prevailed in our English opera before this inno-



GIOVANNI BATTISTA LULLI

Distinguished French Composer and Founder of the Grand Opéra, Paris

vation; the transition from an air to recitative music being more natural, than the passing from a song to plain and ordinary speaking, which was the common method in Purcell's operas.

The only fault I find in our present practice, is the making use of Italian recitativo with English words.

To go to the bottom of this matter, I must observe that the tone, or (as the French call it) the accent of every nation in their ordinary speech is altogether different from that of every other people; as we may see even in the Welsh and Scotch, who border so near upon us. By the tone or accent I do not mean the pronunciation of each particular word, but the sound of the whole sentence. Thus it is very common for an English gentleman when he hears a French tragedy, to complain that the actors all of them speak in a tone: and therefore he very wisely prefers his own countrymen, not considering that a foreigner complains of the same tone in an English actor.

For this reason, the recitative music, in every language, should be as different as the tone or accent of each language; for otherwise, what may properly express a passion in one language will not do it in another. Everyone who has been long in Italy knows very well that the cadences in the recitativo bear a remote affinity to the tone of their voices in ordinary conversation, or, to speak more properly, are only the accents of their language made more musical and tuneful.

Thus the notes of interrogation, or admiration, in the Italian music (if one may so call them), which resemble their accents in discourse on such occasions, are not unlike the ordinary tones of an

English voice when we are angry; in-somuch that I have often seen our audiences extremely mistaken as to what has been doing upon the stage, and expecting to see the hero knock down his messenger, when he has been asking him a question; or fancying that he quarrels with his friend, when he only bids him good-morrow.

For this reason the Italian artists cannot agree with our English musicians in admiring Purcell's compositions, and thinking his tunes so wonderfully adapted to his words; because both nations do not always express the same passions by the same sounds.

I am therefore humbly of opinion, that an English composer should not follow the Italian recitative too servilely, but make use of many gentle deviations from it, in compliance with his own native language. He may copy out of it all the lulling softness and "dying falls" (as Shakspeare calls them), but should still remember that he ought to accommodate himself to an English audience; and, by humouring the tone of our voices in ordinary conversation, have the same regard to the accent of his own language, as those persons had to theirs whom he professes to imitate. It is observed, that several of the singing birds of our own country learn to sweeten their voices, and mellow the harshness of their natural notes, by practising under those that come from warmer climates. In the same manner I would allow the Italian opera to lend our English music as much as may grace and soften it, but never entirely to annihilate and destroy it. Let the infusion be as strong as you please, but still let the subject matter of it be English.



English Composer referred to by Addison

A composer should fit his music to the genius of the people, and consider that the delicacy of hearing, and taste of harmony, have been formed upon those sounds which every country abounds with: in short, that music is of a relative nature, and what is harmony to one ear, may be dissonance to another.

The same observations which I have made upon the recitative part of music, may be applied to all our songs and airs in general.

Signior Baptist Lully acted like a man of sense in this particular. He found the French music extremely defective, and very often barbarous. However, knowing the genius of the people, the humour of the language, and the prejudiced ears he had to deal with, he did not pretend to extirpate the French music, and plant the Italian in its stead; but only to cultivate and civilize it with innumerable graces and modulations which he borrowed from the Italian. By this means the French music is now perfect in its kind; and when you say it is not so good as the Italian, you only mean that it does not please you so well; for there is scarce a Frenchman who would not wonder to hear you give the Italian such a preference. The music of the French is indeed very properly adapted to their pronunciation and accent, as their whole opera wonderfully favours the genius of such a gay and airy people. The chorus in which that opera abounds, gives the parterre frequent opportunities of joining in consort with the stage. This inclination of the audience to sing along with the actors so prevails with them, that I have sometimes known the per-

former on the stage do no more in a celebrated song, than the clerk of a parish church, who serves only to raise the psalm and is afterwards drowned in the music of the congregation. Every actor that comes on the stage is a beau. The queens and heroines are so painted, that they appear as ruddy and cherry-cheeked as milk-maids. The shepherds are all embroidered and acquit themselves in a ball better than our English dancing-masters. I have seen a couple of rivers appear in red stockings; and Alpheus, instead of having his head covered with sedge and bull-rushes, making love in a fair full-bottomed periwig and a plume of feathers; but with a voice so full of shakes and quavers, that I should have thought the murmurs of a country brook the much more agreeable music.

I remember the last opera I saw in that merry nation was the "Rape of Prosperine," where Pluto, to make the more tempting figure, puts himself in a French equipage, and brings Ascalaphus along with him as his valet de chambre. This is what we call folly and impertinence; but what the French look upon as gay and polite.

I shall add no more to what I have here offered, than that music, architecture, and painting, as well as poetry and oratory, are to deduce their laws and rules from the general sense and taste of mankind, and not from the principles of those arts themselves; or, in other words, the taste is not to conform to the art, but the art to the taste. Music is not designed to please only chromatic ears, but all that are capable of distinguishing harsh from disagreeable notes.